Master's in Professional Communication Capstone

"It Just Makes Me Feel Uncomfortable": Social Media Disclosure and Non-Maintained

Relationships

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Abstract

This research project seeks to understand how disclosing intimate details on social media can affect non-maintained relationships. As social media usage continues to rise users continue to disclose intimate details on social media for all of their family members, friends, and followers to see. This research found when relationships are not maintained, disclosure of intimate details on social media affects the receiver, leading to negative and uncomfortable feelings toward the discloser. The information discovered in this research will allow for users and researchers to understand how disclosure is negatively affecting different relationships off of and on social media.

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Signature Page

I certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality

as a thesis for this degree of Master of Professional Communication

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Introduction

Social media usage has increased drastically over the past two decades with the over half of the world's population using at least one form of social media (Kemp, 2020). As Internet users grow, self-disclosure is becoming more common on social media. As the online world continues to grow, self-disclosure online has become essential for developing online relationships (Tsay-Vogel, et al., 2016). Due to the high importance of self-disclosure online, social media platforms have made it easy for individuals to self-disclose online through status updates (Hancock, et al., 2016). With such a great number of individuals on social media it is important to understand how the interactions and disclosure on social media are affecting relationships, specifically non-maintained relationships.

In order for a relationship to function there needs to be an initial development, self-disclosure, and a connection between individuals. For a relationship to continue to function and be maintained there needs to be maintenance and both parties need to be actively trying to maintain the relationship, such as "evoking memories of the friendship" (Canary & Dainton, 2003, p. 81). A non-maintained relationship is one where one or both parties do not continue to try and maintain the relationship, letting communication stop and relational development stop and decrease.

College age students were interviewed in a focus group in order to gain a better understanding. This age group was selected due to the higher percent of social media users and the higher amount of time spend on social media among this age group. 88 percent of young adults are on a social media platform and they spend more time on social media than other age groups (Hruska & Maresvoa, 2020).

As social media usage continues to increase it is important to understand how self-disclosure on social media is affecting non-maintained relationships. Although hyperpersonal relationships are frequently seen on social media, there are face-to-face relationships that fall through the cracks and are no longer maintained through social media. When private information is disclosed through social media to a large group of individuals consisting of maintained and non-maintained relationships there are bound to be a wide variety of reactions to the disclosure. Often the research regarding social media and disclosure has focused on romantic partners and the individual disclosing information (Abbasii, 2019; Gillath, Lee, & Miller, 2019; Beukeboom & Utz, 2011) with little research looking into how the receiver is affected by the disclosure. This research study aims to understand how the receiver is affected by disclosure on social media. Specifically, receivers whose relationship has not been maintained with the discloser.

Literature Review & Rationale

Social Penetration Theory

The social penetration theory was first introduced as a way to explain disclosure in face-to-face communication and interactions (Panos, 2014). The theory was created by Altman & Taylor in 1973 (Panos, 2014). Since the theory's creation it has been adapted to help explain many different forms of communication. Ayres (1979) used the social penetration theory to study verbal patters and how they are "associated with the social penetration process" (p. 193). The theory is used to understand how individuals disclose information through the relationship building process explaining how the process and steps taken allowing relationships to move from superficial to more intimate (Carpenter & Green, 2016). Social penetration theory started what has come to be a long history of research into "relational development" (Foss, Littlejohn, and Oetzel, 2017, p. 224). The theory suggested that individuals have a system in which they disclose

information to about themselves to others and by allowing them to penetrate a sphere that represents information about themselves (Foss, Littlejohn, and Oetzel, 2017). Foss, Littlejohn, and Oetzel (2017) continue by stating that at the core of the sphere the most intimate and private details are held, the further you move away from the core the information becomes less and less private information. In the Social Penetration Theory Altman and Tylor suggest that there are many ways people can disclose information. First there is breadth, a large range of information about an individual. Next, there is depth, detailed or private information about the individual, this is knowledge that is normally obtained over a longer period of time (Foss, Littlejohn, and Oetzel, 2017). Strangers will disclose, or penetrate, different information and at a different rate than a friend will, as well as ask different questions in order to learn more about an individual (Ayres, 1979).

The social penetration theory argues that individuals are like onions, with layers upon layers of information that will slowly be revealed as two individuals get to know each other (Pennington, 2008). Through verbal self-disclosure individuals can slowly become closer in their relationship (Griffin, 2012). As the layers are peeled back during the social penetration process, eventually the "core self" will be discovered (Carpenter & Green, 2016, p. 1).

There are four parts of the social penetration process that can lead to a closer relationship or the termination of a relationship.

1. Peripheral items are exchanged more frequently and sooner than private information.

2. Self-disclosure is reciprocal, especially in the early stages of relationship development.

3. Penetration is rapid at the start but slows down quickly as the tightly wrapped inner layers are reached.

4. Depenetration is a gradual process of layer-by-layer withdraw (Griffin, 2012, pp. 115-116).

As individuals continue build different relationships, there is a cost-benefit analysis that occurs when individuals are deciding whether or not to reveal information about themselves (Griffin, 2012). This cost-benefit analysis can affect relationships by helping or hurting them. For example, if one individual chooses not to disclose information it can lead to a depenetration and eventual termination of a relationship.

Since the introduction of social penetration theory, many researchers have adapted the theory to different forms of communication and relationships. Ayres (1979) used the social penetration theory to study verbal patterns and how they are "associated with the social penetration process" (p. 193). He believed that "questions can be viewed as devices for probing various aspects of another's personality in order to obtain rewards" (Ayres, 1979, p. 194). Overtime as individuals continue to share information the penetration process will move from "superficial, non-intimate areas to more intimate, deeper layers of personality" (Honeycutt, 1986, p. 652). In all relationships a "constant cost-reward analysis" has to be continually thought about in order to "determine social penetration when dealing with strangers" (Ji and Lieber, 2008, p. 32). In more formed relationships the cost-reward analysis does not have to be thought through as often, but still is used when disclosing new information or revealing a new part of oneself. It has been argued by many researchers that "self-disclosure is necessary for both building and maintaining close relationships" (Bergen and McBride, 2008).

Honeycutt (1986) expanded on the original ideals of the social penetration theory and moved the theory past the superficial level to "more intimate, deeper layers of personality" in order to further the social penetration process (p. 652). As the theory continued to advance social

penetration has been discussed in understanding self-disclosure and the need to build and maintain relationships (Bergen & McBride, 2008), romantic relationships (Honeycutt, 1986; Ji & Liber, 2008), online communication (Panos, 2014; Buehler & High, 2019; Bergen & McBride, 2008), and mixed media relationships, online and face-to-face (Ellison, Gibbs, & Heino, 2006).

Social penetration and romantic relationships have been studied time and time again to understand and explain how the social penetration process can lead to romantic relationships, understanding social penetration theory in marriages, and its use in online dating. Honeycutt (1986) discussed the common idea that good communication leads to a good marriage, but he argues that good communication is so much more than it seems. He argues the idea that a good marriage is based on the "belief that one is understood by one's partner" leading to a happy marriage (Honeycutt, 1986, p.652). Honeycutt (1986) continues stating that the ability to understand comes from further penetration, or continued disclosure, among each individual. Ji and Lieber (2008) study the blend between social penetration theory, romantic relationships, and social media. Through their study they found the information sharing presented in the social penetration theory is reversed when using social media and online communication, showing that "users tend to open up faster, yielding relational benefits associated with sharing deeper emotions" faster and in reverse order (Ji and Liber, 2008, p. 39). These online relationships are created and sustained in order to "reduce social costs and achieve desired levels of social penetration and relational satisfaction" (Ji and Liber, 2008, p. 32). This study showed that social media and online communication can and is a great tool to build and maintain romantic relationships.

It was thought that "the main route to deep social penetration is through verbal self-disclosure" (Griffin, 2012, p. 114). However, as social media and online communication has

evolved, the social penetration theory has evolved, and now individuals don't follow the typical process of the social penetration theory when online. Individuals have a different idea of what public and private information is and there is a much quicker process for developing and creating relationships than was originally suggested by the social penetration theory (Pennington, 2008). Much of the way individuals communicate online has been studied through computer mediated communication (CMC).

Originally researchers thought that the social penetration theory would not be able to adapt to social media sites and online communication but as technology continued to improve it was accepted that the theory could be used in online communication (Panos, 2014). Bazarova and Choi (2014) stated that "millions of people routinely self-disclose personal information on social network sites" (p. 1). As individuals continue to self-disclose on social media it becomes increasingly important to research the social penetration theory use on social media. Social media is key to the social penetration theory as technology continues to advance. Individuals use social media to receive support, advice, and comfort from friends, family, followers, and other individuals that they interact with on social media (Buehler and High, 2019). As individuals build these relationships through social media, they continue to exhibit stages of the social penetration theory as they begin to trust other social media users, and social media sites, more and more. Ji and Lieber (2008) found that on individuals' social media profiles there are more instances of self-disclosure of emotions, feelings, and needs than there were of expectations, attitudes, and opinion. Researchers discusses the importance of reciprocal disclosure among friends, especially while developing an online friendship because too much openness can be seen as problematic (Bergen and McBride, 2008).

As relationships continue to grow and develop in face-to-face interactions as well as online and through social media it is important to adapt and research theories and how they apply to communication on social media. These "mixed-mode relationships have become an important site for revisiting well established theories of relational development, such as social penetration theory" (Ellison, Gibbs, and Heino, 2006, p. 153). Although there has been a great deal of research into the social penetration theory and relationships on and off social media and online communication, there has been little research conducted looking at how disclosure on social media can affect relationships that have not been maintained. Bergen and McBride (2008) researched unwanted disclosure in close friendships and found that close friends labeled this unwanted disclosure as shocking, "received with some reluctancy," and some felt they were reluctant confidants due to the unwanted desire of the disclosed information (p. 55).

Many individuals are now using the Internet as a way to receive support from others (Pan, et al., 2018). Pan, Feng, and Wingate (2018) found that in 2012 "eight percent of Internet users have used online support groups or forums" (p. 4) possibly leading to many reluctant confidants. If close friends find unwanted disclosure as shocking and receive it reluctantly, one can only image how receivers that do not feel close to the discloser may feel when such information is disclosed to them.

Social Media

Currently over one half of the world's population has at least one social media account (Kemp, 2020). Experts suggest the popularity of social media is due to the ability that it offers individuals to "receive or create and share public messages at a low cost" (Hruska & Maresvoa, 2020, p. 1).

Social media was first introduced in the late 1990's with multiple social media sites that struggled to gain any popularity or traction (Shah, 2016). It wasn't until the early 2000's when social media really started to gain popularity through MySpace, Friendster, and eventually Facebook and other social media sites that are now widely used by many individuals around the world (Shah, 2016).

Now, it is estimated that young adults spend around six hours a day using social media (Hruska & Maresvoa, 2020). Currently, 88 percent of 18 to 29 year olds are on a social media platform (Hruska & Maresvoa, 2020). Not only do young adults use social media for such a large amount of time, but they are often using multiple platforms at once (Hruska & Maresvoa, 2020). Researchers have attributed the popularity and time spent on social media to the highly addictive nature and have categorized the social media addiction as behavior and activity addictions (Wojdan, et, at., 2021).

With so many individuals using social media it has slowly moved into influencing political participation, identity construction, relationships, and friendships (Ledbetter, et. al., 2011). Social media users tend to use the platforms as a way to connect with others, however, not every social media user is wanting to connect on the different platforms. (Ledbetter, et. al., 2011). If there are social media users that are not using social media to connect with individuals and maintain relationships, it is possible that social media may be used only for online voyeurism (Wang, 2015).

Recently a trend on social media has been growing in popularity. This trend has multiple names but is most commonly known as online voyeurism, Facebook stalking, and cyber-stalking (Su, 2012). While many consider this casual browsing on social media, it has begun to be considered a form of voyeurism (Su, 2012). Previously voyeurism referred to "sexual interest in

or practice of spying on people who are naked or who are engaged in sexual activities" however recently it has been used to explain the phenomena on social media where the "voyeur obtains information and hence learns from others by watching them but gives little in return" (Matti & Najmul, 2014. p. 3). In more recent years, online voyeurism has grown and become popular among young adults and teens (Doster, 2013). This trend began to occur as Facebook stalking slowly became a common place practice as a way to cope with FOMO (fear of missing out) (Doster, 2013). One researcher found that teens would use online voyeurism as a way to obtain more knowledge about their peers in order to fit in and connect with them (Doster, 2013). It is thought that online voyeurism is an important part of how users "create value from" social media (Matti & Najmul, 2014. p. 2).

Mediated Relationships

As society continues to use social media more and more, it is no surprise that relationships will be formed, made, and maintained on social media platforms. The way individuals interact on social media can reflect the relationship they have with each other (Chu & Suthers, 2013). Although social media and face-to-face interactions tend to seem like they are in different worlds, the interactions that occur on social media do affect the relationship outside of social media, especially in relationships where one individual is seen as an authority figure such as in a teacher-student relationship (Hershkovzt & Forkosh-Baruch, 2017).

Pettegrew and Day (2015) stated that technology and social media are changing the way people interact and communicate with each other. When communicating online, one can "have greater control over what they communicate to others" (Pang, et. al., 2018, p. 72). They are able to "edit, delete, and rewrite messages to make them reflect intended effects before sending them" and all of this is possible to do "without interfering with conversational flow" unlike in face-to-

face interactions (Walther, 2011, p. 461). The popularity of online relationships, hyperpersonal,

can be attributed to the fact that users tend to show higher self-esteem, less social anxiety, and

tend to self-disclose more often (Gilding & Henderson, 2004). Many users of social media

choose to disclose information on the different platforms for many different reasons, one of the

primary reasons being social support (Hancock & Luo, 2020). While some social media users

may use the platform for social support, there are many other reasons why individuals may

choose to use the different social media platforms.

Facebook

Facebook is an extremely popular social media site. It is currently one of the most

popular social media sites in the world (Wang, 2015). Currently there are around 2.8 billion

active users (Tankovska, 2021). Not only is there a large number of Facebook users around the

world but, individuals tend to be highly engaged with the platform. It was found that 70 percent

of Facebook users log onto the social media platform daily and 45 percent of those users log on

multiple times a day (Duggan, et. al., 2015). Some of Facebooks popularity could be due to the

fact that it is an ideal platform for individuals to form, manage, and maintain impressions on how

they want to present themselves to the world (Wang, 2015).

One of the main uses of Facebook is to "friend" other Facebook users and to use it for

self-presentation in order to "display socially desirable self-images for others to form

impressions on the profile owners, not only through self-generated content but also through

other-generated and machine-regenerated information" (Wang, 2015, p. 2). While individuals

spend a great deal of time forming an ideal image for Facebook, individuals that spend more

time on Facebook tend to have lower life satisfaction and more stress in their lives (Bevan, et. al,

2014).

Many individuals choose to disclose information on Facebook, thus leading to a creation of self-presentation on the social media site. With so much of one person's life posted on Facebook, many social media users choose to silently watch and view other users' profiles. Many individuals that want to maintain their interpersonal relationships with individuals, friends, and their romantic partners are more likely to "engage in electronic surveillance online" (Wang, 2015, p.14).

Facebook has created a difficult area for individuals to discern what information to disclose and what information to keep to themselves. Individuals tend to find Facebook confusing when trying to "regulate their privacy boundaries" (Child & Frampton, 2013, p. 2261). Users struggling to define their privacy boundaries could potentially lead to difficult and awkward situations between different users.

While many individuals choose to share important life events on Facebook or disclose intimate details, choosing to share these types of posts on Facebook are linked with an increase in stress (Bevan, et. al, 2014). If sharing intimate details causes an increase in stress for the discloser, it is important to understand how these posts are affecting the receiver.

Instagram

Over 62 percent of Instagram's users are made up of individuals between the ages of 18 through 34-year-olds (Sehl, 2021). As of April of 2020, Instagram had more than one billion active users (Priadana, et. al., 2020). 49 % of Instagram users log on daily with 32 % of those users logging on multiple times a day and 24 % of users log on weekly (Duggan, et. al., 2015). While there is a large portion of the population on Instagram, it is reported to have the worst impact on individuals' mental health (Ilma, et. al., 2020). The more time an individual spends on

Instagram is linked to social media addiction and lower life satisfaction, especially in female users (Yesilyurt & Turhan, 2020).

Many Instagram users find the pressure of maintaining an image to be overwhelming, so they create a second account where the user will upload any content that seems to be "inappropriate to be uploaded into the primary account" (Ilma, et. al., 2020, p. 1). The pressure to maintain a specific image on different social media accounts can become very taxing and stressful for different users.

As individuals struggle to understand privacy boundaries on social media, it is important to understand how this disclosed information is affecting the receiver. If disclosers find social media is causing additional stress and anxiety, it is important to discover how the information is affecting other users reading the information. With so much research looking at the discloser on social media, it is important to look at how information is absorbed by the receiver and how it affects their view on the non-maintained relationships.

RQ 1: How are relationships that are not maintained online affected by intimate details disclosed on social media platforms?

Method

In order to understand how non-maintained relationships are affected by intimate details disclosed on social media, two focus groups were conducted. All participants were gathered from Southern Utah University Communication 1010 (Introduction to Communication) spring 2021 courses.

Focus groups were used as a way to understand what the participant thought and felt regarding disclosure on social media. Focus groups first gained popularity in the 1970's after the United States underwent a rescission, leading to layoffs and researchers having limited access

and resources available to conduct interviews (Raymond, 2010). From that point on, focus groups continued to slowly make their way into academic research.

The goal of a focus group is to encourage a group discussion in order to "gain a broad range of views on the research topic" that helps the researcher understand the participants perspectives (Hennink, 2014, p. 1). What makes focus groups beneficial, is the opportunity they provide for participants to discuss and communicate ideas, potentially leading to a more in-depth discussion of the topic (Hennink, 2014).

Potential participants were asked to take a qualifying survey to make sure they fit the conditions, if they used Facebook or Instagram for more than two hours or more each day. After selecting participants, they were then asked to participate in a focus group.

The research participants were made up of 10 young adults that are active on social media. Most young adults spending around six hours a day on social media (Hruska & Maresvoa, 2020) leading to a need for all participants to use social media daily. All participants used social media on average for three hours each day.

The social media sites focused on during this research were Instagram and Facebook. Facebook is currently the most popular social media site with over 2.6 billion active users (Tankovska, 2021). Instagram is one of the most popular social media sites with 1.2 billion users (Tankovska, 2021). The social media sites were chosen due to their popularity. Nine of the 10 participants were active users of Facebook and Instagram, with one participant being an active user of Instagram.

Due to limitations and different situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic two different focus groups were held. One focus group was conducted on Zoom and the other was

conducted in-person. All local guidelines were followed while conducting and participating in the focus group, limiting exposure and risk to any and all participants.

Non-maintained relationships will be looked at in comparison to the relationship levels presented in the social penetration theory: orientation, exploratory, affective exchange, stable exchange, and depenetration (Carpenter & Green, 2016).

The orientation stage, where individuals share surface level information about themselves (Carpenter & Green, 2016), seems to be almost skipped over on social media. All of this information is just a click away. By looking at a user's profile page one can often find information that would be shared during the orientation stage. This step can often be skipped on social media as most individuals have met previously in a face-to-face interaction before adding each other on social media (Pennington, 2015).

Exploratory, when communication goes beyond a superficial level and communication will increase "in the breadth of topics discussed" (Carpenter & Green, 2016, p. 2). This can be seen on social media through everyday posts as well as deeper on the individual's social media profile. This is the first stage to be truly represented online (Pennington, 2015).

Affective exchange information that is shared starts to come from deeper levels within and will begin to reveal more "intimate information" (Carpenter & Green, 2016, p. 2). This stage seems to be skipped over on social media, unless individuals private message each other.

Stable exchange happens when thoughts and feelings are openly expressed about a wide range of topics (Carpenter & Green, 2016). This seems to be the most common stage used on social media. This occurs when individuals post on social media regarding different religious or political beliefs, as well as sharing more private details about their lives.

Depenetration happens when a relationship begins to end. This can happen slowly or abruptly (Carpenter & Green, 2016). What makes social media unique is most relationships on social media have entered this stage, if mostly maintained online. The relationship has often been slowly going through a depenetration, and can even happen abruptly, such as when someone unfriends or blocks another user.

Results

The two focus groups began by discussing the participants social media usage and the different types of relationships they have on Instagram and Facebook. All participants used Instagram and Facebook on average over two hours each day.

The orientation and exploratory stage seen in the Social Penetration Theory occurred before participants relationships were introduced to social media. Most participants stated that they follow mainly family and friends on Facebook. However, on Instagram several participants stated that they follow and are followed by many individuals they do not know or have never met in person. In these situations, the participants experienced some of the orientation and exploratory stage while getting to know the individuals on social media. One participant stated that there are "Some people I've never met on Instagram, but I see their posts and like them all the time and I think, 'I don't even know who you are, but I follow you.'" Another participant agreed stating that "On Facebook it's mostly friends and family that I interact with and a few here and there that are a little more distant. But on Instagram I mostly follow people that I actually don't know and won't interact with." Several participants agreed all stating they follow people they do not know in life outside of social media or even at all.

All participants stated that they follow and are followed by individuals that they do not have maintained relationships with. These individuals consisted of people the participants knew

many years ago, friends that had drifted apart, people they had previous problems with and would not consider friends, and individuals they knew from places they had moved from when they were younger. Affective and stable exchange tends to happen when participants see other users' posts and like, comment, or message the other user. Such as this participant that stated they have many friends on social media that have moved away for school or other reasons and they "don't see the anymore so the only time we really interact is over Instagram or by seeing pictures but, we don't really talk to each other anymore." One participant stated they have gone without interacting with some of their friends on social media in person for five years. While another participant discussed many social media friends that they have from when they moved back in fourth grade. The physical distance and lack of interaction on social media makes it difficult for users to participate in the active and stable exchange phases.

Participants stated that they will like or comment on different posts from these individuals that they have non-maintained relationships with "every once in a while." However, they do not message the individuals frequently or try to maintain the relationships much past a like on their social media post here and there. At this point in participants relationships depenetration has already occurred and the relationship continues to move further into depentration. Another participant agreed with the first, stating that they will "message each other when we first add asking each other for updates but that's the only time" they will message those individuals. One participant stated that the people they "interact with most on social media are the people that I interact with in person as well" and many other participants agreed. Although participants had different individuals that they followed on social media, all agreed that they follow individuals that they don't have a relationship with or individuals that they have not maintained their relationship with.

When asked if the participants have ever seen an individual post something on social media that they feel is intimate or they would never personally post, all participants stated they have all seen and experienced this at one time or another. Many participants agreed it can be overwhelming and annoying at times.

The uncomfortable feelings can be associated with the depenetration of the relationship. Several participants talked about individuals oversharing on social media. One participant stated that they see "a lot of people posting about personal struggles that they are going through or struggles that their family is going through." Another participant stated that they see "a lot of parents posting about their kids…[and] sometimes it goes way too into detail about their kids' lives." While one participant expressed concern for individuals that overshare on social media stating it can sometimes lead to bad situations, such as getting hacked or strangers knowing where they live.

When discussing this type of disclosure on social media one participant stated, "that is not something I post on social media." Another stated "I just feel like it's sometimes a bit too much" and another participant agreed that it can be "a little much." While one participant stated that they feel like the sharing can sometimes be "a bad idea."

One participant stated that there is one individual that shares intimate details on their social media page that does not bother them because it is not out of the ordinary for this individual to "overshare." The participant continued by stating that "it is annoying but, it's not too much in terms of their personality" leading to the idea that how disclosure is viewed can be determined by the personality of the individual posting the information on the social media page and the viewer.

As the discussion continued many participants agreed that this form of disclosure has led to a negative view of the discloser and negative feelings toward the discloser in previous situations. One participant stated that "it definitely changes the relationship I have with them…[it] causes negative emotions and responses from me that are going to negatively impact our relationship." All participants agreed that they feel weird and uncomfortable about posts on social media that disclose too much information.

As the discussion continued one participant stated that they "tend to just ignore them," the individual posting and the post disclosing intimate details, and "try to avoid it." They continued by stating that they will internalize their feelings and think negatively of the individuals. Another participant agreed about internalizing the negative feelings toward the discloser. They continued stating that they tend to "get uncomfortable" when the individual posts "too personal of information" and they will end up trying to just "scroll past it" and ignore the post. One participant stated that sometimes "you almost feel like you have to comment and say something but at the same time you don't really care that much, and you think 'I don't really know you'…it just makes me feel so uncomfortable so you just kinda swipe past them or even unfollow them."

This statement lead into further discussion of what actions are taken by participants when they see these posts on social media disclosing intimate details.

One participant stated that when someone is posting "uncomfortable things or just kinda annoying things I mute [them] but don't unfollow them." Many participants agreed stating that they have muted people that they follow, or that follow them, on social media. However, one participant stated that it depends on the connection with the individual posting stating that "it just depends on my connection with them" that if it is someone that they "haven't talked to in years

who isn't really part of my life sometimes I will unfollow them." Several participants stated that

they have unfollowed an individual before based off of content that was shared or posted on

social media that the viewer felt uncomfortable seeing. Only one participant stated that they

would try and "reach out to someone in the real world" to see if the person is "doing okay and

not actually just doing it for attention." This person was in the minority, with the majority of

participants stating they would mute the individual or unfollow them on social media, because it

can become "too much."

When asked how intimate disclosure on social media affects their relationship with these

individuals outside of social media one participant stated that they find the disclosure annoying

and uncomfortable but not bad enough that they "wouldn't ever talk to that person again."

Another participant agreed with this statement but continued stating that sometimes it can cause

permanent damage to a relationship and make it so they "don't communicate with them

anymore." In comparison, one participant stated that "sometimes people feel like they can post

whatever they want on social media but when you're in person it's like it didn't even happen or

they didn't even say that." They continued stating that these situations are weird because

"sometimes I feel like it doesn't even affect it" leading to little crossover from social media and

the "real world."

However, several participants stated that this form of disclosure can harm relationships or

just make individuals feel uncomfortable. One participant stated that it can be uncomfortable

when someone that they have not interacted with in several years posts or comments on social

media because "we don't really know each other anymore." Two other participants continued on

this idea stating that is it very difficult and uncomfortable when someone that they have had a

"falling out with" will comment or post on social media. One participant stated that "it just bugs

me because it makes me feel like they aren't willing to put any effort into real life relationships, but they still want to pretend…they just care about how people perceive it on social media." Another participant agreed stating that they get frustrated with people that only try to maintain relationships on social media and that these interactions can be uncomfortable because they've been "in different places for years now." All participants agreed that the majority of feelings from the interactions on social media tend to come from how their relationship was prior to becoming non-maintained and moving the relationship online.

When asked if these relationships could be fixed after being harmed by the disclosure on social media all participants agreed that if the relationship was going to be fixed, it had to be done on a more personal level and not through social media. Participants agreed that it needed to be more one-on-one that way they could know "their real intent and if they actually care or just want to save face." One participant stated that when communicating over social media it "leaves a lot of room for interpretation so it would be better to reach out one-on-one because there is a lot of room for you to be misunderstood or for them to be misunderstood" possibly leading to a "more problematic" situation. Another participant stated that when individuals have tried to fix relationships over social media it can be more irritating because "some people think that as long as they comment or like your post, they still think that your friends" even though there may be unresolved issues. However, one participant said sometimes they don't care to fix the relationship if there has been too much damage. Stating that if they don't "associate with them now, there is not really much of a point to fix it." While another participant stated that there will be people that will "disagree with me and I disagree with them but that's just how the world is" and that we all just have to find a way to be okay with it because "you have your opinion and I have mine."

Discussion

After transcribing and analyzing the focus groups, it was found that non-maintained relationships are negatively affected by intimate details that are disclosed on social media. Many participants seemed to attribute negative feelings to awkward situations or posts making them feel uncomfortable. These posts were sometimes seen as attention seeking or just plain uncomfortable. Most participants agreed that continued disclosure of intimate details lead to more negative feelings. Almost all participants agreed that the relationships could be fixed, as long as fixed outside of social media and in a more personal manner.

All participants at some point went through the orientation and exploratory stage with the individuals they follow on social media. This stage most likely occurred in a face-to-face setting or when the participants first added the user. The other stages present, affective exchange and stable exchange seemed to be skipped all together, except for occasional posts, likes, and comments. However, most users experienced and underwent a depenetration with the other users.

The depenetration occurred in many different ways for the participants. For some participants it was a gradual depenetration overtime as they "don't see them anymore" due to a move or because they are at different phases in their lives. This depenetration slowly occurred until now they will "like a post every once in a while" but they don't interact much past that. For some participants the depenetration occurred much faster due to a falling out between friends or a sudden change of events.

After the depenetration has occurred it is not uncommon for social media users to feel uncomfortable when another user posts intimate details on social media. All participants stated

they had felt uncomfortable at one point due to something another user had posted. Most participants stated this can be overwhelming and annoying.

These overwhelming and annoying feelings lead to negative feelings and views of the discloser. These negative feelings can "definitely change the relationship" leading to a more permanent version of depenetration, unfriending or blocking. All participants agreed that the way the intimate disclosure affects the relationship after the depenetration all depends on how the relationship was before it went online and began the depenetration process.

One interesting point that participants continued to bring up was the fact that they would all be willing to mend and fix the relationship after the uncomfortable disclosure and depenetration. The mending just had to occur offline or on a one-on-one basis. Participants stated that in order to fix the relationship they would want to know "their real intent and if they actually care or just want to save face."

All responses showed that intimate disclosure on social media does affect non-maintained relationship. The disclosure affects the receiver by making them feel uncomfortable, annoyed, and can harm the relationship. However, this does not mean the relationship can't be mended or has to end.

After conducting the focus groups a few topics were brought up that could be used for future research. As discussed at the beginning of the results section, the two social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram are both used differently. It appeared more individuals followed and were followed by people they do not know on Instagram, leading to possible different feelings and associations between the two social media sites. Future research could look at how disclosure of intimate details affects the receiver differently on each social media platform. Additionally, researchers could look at how disclosure of intimate details affects the

receiver if they had fond memories with the discloser or had a more positive relationship with them before the relationship became non-maintained or moved onto social media. This could be compared to relationships that the reiver views as being more negative before the relationship became non-maintained and moved to social media. Additionally, a framework could be developed that explains what causes depenetration online. This could help further researcher and understanding of how online communication affects the Social Penetration Theory.

There were several limitations present during this research project. One limitation present was the lack of availability to more diverse participants. All participants were students at Southern Utah University with limited diversity. There were only two male participants with the majority of participants being female. The other limitation present was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic limitations had to be put into place. Masks were worn limiting facial expressions and nonverbal communication. The COVID-19 pandemic also made it difficult to find participants that would be willing to participate in a focus group. While the limitations were present, the researcher does not feel it hindered the answers found in the research.

Conclusion

This research project was conducted in the hopes of understanding how disclosure of intimate details on social media affects the receiver. With such a large portion of the population on at least one social media platform it is important to understand how disclosure on social media is affecting relationships, specifically the receiver of the information in non-maintained relationships.

Through this research it was discovered that disclosure of intimate details on social media does affect the receiver when the relationship has not been maintained. All participants stated

that they had seen someone on their social media page disclose information that they themselves would not have posted. All participants stated that this disclosure made them feel uncomfortable and most agreed it harmed their relationship with the discloser. However, all participants agreed that the relationship, in most situations, could be fixed as long as it was not attempted over social media.

This research shows the importance of understanding how disclosure affects the receiver. With previous research focusing on disclosure and the discloser it is important to look at how the information is being received. Social media has changed and altered the way society communicates. It is important to understand how communication over social media affects relationships. This study shows that disclosure is not always beneficial to relationships, especially on social media when the relationship has not been maintained.

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